From “Northern Lights” to “The Ground”: A Stylistic Survey of the Choral Works of Ola Gjeilo

by Steven Brown

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Methods

The Problem

The immensely popular contemporary choral composer Ola Gjeilo’s works include complex harmonies and unconventional uses of text that prove difficult to analyze within the confines of traditional music theory.

Research Process and Goal

To identify systematic listening strategies and important analytical perspectives for performers and audiences. This involved conducting multi-parametric analyses of Ola Gjeilo’s choral pieces, which consider formal designs, harmony, text painting, and score notes. This study provides paradigms for understanding and appreciating Gjeilo’s compositional techniques.

Literature Review

There is little scholarship on Ola Gjeilo’s compositional style. Dr. Brian Schmidt’s Doctoral Dissertation, “The Choral Music of Ola Gjeilo: A New Vision of the Choral Instrument in the 21st Century” details Gjeilo’s compositional background, delves into some of his unique stylistic attributes, and offers information for conductors that will perform Gjeilo’s music. Schmidt describes Gjeilo’s use of the choir as a symphonic, background texture to create a musical atmosphere.

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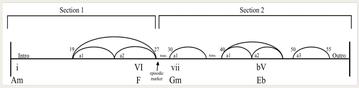
Text

Long-Form Text Painting

Inspired by his home country of Norway, Gjeilo commissioned this text to paint the land he describes as “quite barren, and intensely beautiful.” In an expression of long-form text painting, Gjeilo paints the physical diversity of the tundra by exploring key areas from A minor to Eb major (two keys diverse in modality as well as their separation by a tritone) by seamlessly journeying from these diverse harmonic and modal locations.

Tundra Formal Diagram

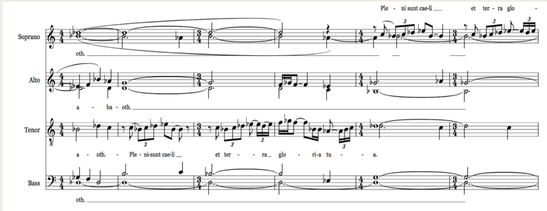


Wide, worn and weathered,
Sacred expanse
Of green and white and granite grey;
Snowy patches strewn,
Anchored to the craggy earth,
Unmoving;
While clouds dance
Across the vast, eternal sky

Text Coloration

Often times, Gjeilo disregards the clarity of individual words in favor of the colors their vowels and consonants create. This is partially accomplished through the elongation of vowels. This is most evident in measures 8-13. When singing the word “Sabaoth”, singers elongate the final syllable, [o], creating a harmonic backdrop to support the next verse.

Sanctus (mm. 8-13)

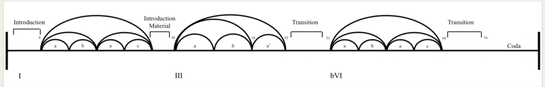


Significance of *Three*

Form

Gjeilo’s incorporation of the number **three** also influences his harmonic selection through his use of tertian relationships. These tertian relationships unify large sections of his pieces and make up many of his chordal progressions. *The Ground* shows its devotion to these tertian relationships through its three-part sectional division. Section one of *The Ground* is in G major. In measure 30, the piece suddenly modulates to B major for section two. In measure 51, section three begins with another sudden modulation, but this time to Eb major.

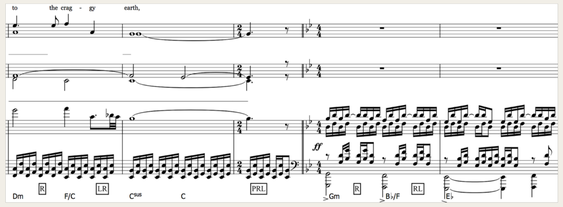
The Ground Formal Diagram



Tertian Relationships

Tertian relationships are most easily observed through the use of the Neo-Riemannian tonnetz. The tonnetz is an analytical tool that tracks tertian relationships, separating them into three main categories: Parallel, Relative, and Leading Tone. These terms have been abbreviated as P, R, and L respectively. Measures 21-29 of *Tundra* contain a seamless progression, using these tertian relationships.

Tundra (mm. 21-29)



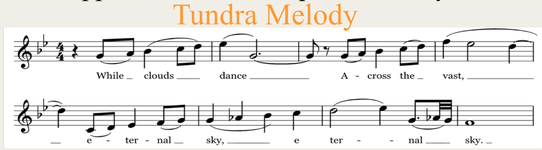
Harmony

Polytonality

Polytonality: a single segment of music that exists in multiple keys

In *Tundra*, Gjeilo moves from the key of A minor and to F major in the first half of the piece. In the second half, he moves from G minor to Eb major. While these transitions happen gradually, they both support the same transposed melody.

Tundra Melody

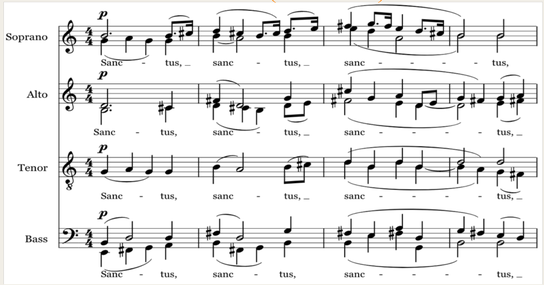


Polyfunctionality

Polyfunctionality: the simultaneous use of functional harmony from two different keys.

Sanctus: London establishes a pattern of alternating cadences, continuing to highlight the tonal prominence of both G major and B minor.

Sanctus (mm. 1-4)



Each cadence reinforces a key without entirely abandoning its counterpart’s tonality. It should be noted that the term ‘cadence’ in this context less represents melodic closure and more represents the reaffirmation of tonic. These G major and B minor cadential reaffirmations are notated in green and orange respectively in the chart below.

A a1	1				2				3				4			
Bm	iv7	V6/VI	VI	V/III	i	V/III	VI	VI || V/III	ii11	iv	V/III || VI	V/III || VI	i7			
	Em7	D/F#	G	A9	Bm	D7	G	G|A	Bm11	Em	A/D	A/G	G/B	Bm7	Em/B	Bm7
GM	vi7	V6	I	V9/V	iii	V7	I	I || V/V	iii11	vi	V	I	I6	iii7	vi64	iii7

Conclusions:

Ola Gjeilo has a unique approach to text painting that involves using the sounds of consonants and vowels for coloristic purposes.

Gjeilo conveys the larger sentiment of a text rather than painting each individual word through long-form text painting.

Gjeilo uses tripartite formal designs in many of his works.

By employing tertian harmonies throughout his pieces, Gjeilo highlights third-based movements in his chordal progressions.

Using tertian chordal progressions in combination with long-form text painting results in polytonal melodies within two key areas.

The use of functional harmony from two mediant-related keys results in polyfunctional textures in Gjeilo’s music.